

Undertaking Action Research on assessment feedback within a group of West Midlands Further Education Colleges

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[This report is a synopsis of a much longer document. A full report can be obtained from the author]

Abstract

This research project investigated the views of both students and staff in local FE colleges on the feedback given on higher education courses to assignment work. This paper seeks to analyse the students' views on the quality of feedback that they receive and the type of feedback they would like to receive. Staff were asked about the feedback they gave and their views on what constituted good feedback.

Introduction

Further education, it is argued, is a hybrid education sector, sitting as it does between school and university and offering a range of programmes from sub-GCSE to sub-degree level. In undertaking a literature review the researcher failed to discover any work specifically undertaken on feedback in the FE sector. Therefore, the first task for the researcher was to seek to contextualise the research in relation to the current paradigms of feedback, within the school and university sectors described in the literature, to aid in the validation of the research. This was accepting at the same time, that neither paradigm could adequately describe the 'typical' Further Education College or lecturer, who might teach across a range of courses and levels from GCSE/GNVQ Intermediate to HND and professional courses.

Methodology

Questionnaires were given to both teaching staff and students on one higher education course in each of the five participating colleges. (Appendix 1 & 2) Having received the questionnaire data, the researcher produced a résumé of the results, which then allowed the monitoring group to redefine the areas that were being looked at, in relation to feedback as part of the second spiral of action research [Coghlan and Brannick (2001)]. This then led to further diagnosis of the issues, followed by further action using focus group interviews. The focus group interviews (Appendix 3 & 4) were carried out with the same staff and students at each of the colleges who had filled in questionnaires.

Analysis of student questionnaires

Learning goals

The questionnaire was sent out to students studying on a range of HE programmes in FE Colleges. There were 47 returns which represented the majority of the students on the targeted courses. In accordance with previous research by Black and Wiliam (1998), which suggests that feedback is effective when the goal of the individual student is clear, and also when the student is highly committed to achieving that goal, and is further enjoying their course, the first three questions concentrated on finding out if the students' goals were clear. The general response suggests that 72% of students felt that the learning goals were clear in all their subjects, with 28% of students indicating that learning goals were clear in some of their subjects. Students were a little less sure that this was carried through into assignment work. Figure 2 shows that only 53% of respondents felt that all their assignments had clear learning goals, whereas 43% felt that most of their assignments had clear learning goals. A small minority (2%) suggested that none of their assignments had clear learning goals.

Course satisfaction

Building on the work by Black and William (1998), it is argued that students who find their courses interesting and stimulating are likely to be responsive to feedback on their progress. In answering this question, only 36% of the respondents found all the subjects on their courses interesting and

stimulating. However, 53% of respondents felt that most subjects on their courses were interesting and stimulating with 8% of respondents stating that some of their subjects were interesting and stimulating and 3% concluding that none of their subjects were interesting. It is argued that the significant test of students' satisfaction might be whether they would recommend the course to others. When answering this question, 75% of respondents stated that they would recommend the course to a friend, with 19% stating that they would possibly recommend their course to a friend, and only 6% of respondents saying that they would not recommend the course to a friend.

The respondents were also asked if they felt that the college had given them what they had been promised. When answering this question, figure 6 shows 34% of the respondents felt that they had received exactly what they were promised, with 53% stating that in most ways they had been given by their college what they had been promised. Only 9% and 4% respectively of respondents felt they had received some or not much of what they were promised. The data collected suggested that the students were generally very positive about their courses of study. It is argued therefore, that any dissatisfaction or criticism of feedback could not be interpreted as being within the framework of an overall dissatisfaction with the college, but could be interpreted as being directly related to feedback.

Feedback satisfaction

Having therefore identified the general satisfaction of respondents to the course, the respondents were asked to state if they felt that the feedback that they received from their tutors on the course was good. 28% of respondents thought that feedback was good in all subjects, with 55% of respondents thinking that feedback was good in some subjects and satisfactory in others. There was a small minority (8%) of respondents, who thought that the feedback they received was good in some subjects, but was poor in others, and 4.5% of respondents thought that feedback was satisfactory in all subjects. This left 4.5% of respondents, who felt that feedback that they received was satisfactory in some subjects and poor in others. It is argued that this shows consistency with general course satisfaction and confirms the general findings of Black and Wiliam (1998).

Black (1998) has also suggested that some students are reluctant to ask questions and engage in class feedback because of fear of failure from their previous studies. It was difficult to explore this question in the questionnaire to any great detail. However, 38% of the respondents felt that they wanted to ask questions in all their subjects, 28% felt that they wanted to ask questions in most of their subjects, 30% of respondents felt they wanted to ask questions in some of their subjects, and 4% felt that they did not want to ask questions in any of their subjects (see figure 4). This does not appear to provide any firm conclusions, and thus more research would have to be done to find the views of students on the courses as to their feelings about interactive participation in class due to insecurity because of any past failures they may have experienced. However, it is argued that the data would suggest that there is no reluctance on the part of the respondents wanting to ask questions.

Feedback methods

The respondents were then asked about the ways in which they receive feedback. The largest number of respondents (24) stated that feedback was given through a grade and comments written on the assignment. However, 20 respondents claimed to have received feedback through a grade and comments written on an assignment sheet. Also, 14 respondents claimed to receive feedback on assignments with both a grade and comments on both assignment sheets and on the assignment itself, and 20 respondents claimed to have received general oral feedback in a group situation. Additionally, 21 respondents claimed to have received private oral feedback. No respondents claimed to have received feedback by fax, or over the telephone, with 1 respondent claiming to have received feedback using e-mail. The respondents, when asked what was their preferred model of feedback, indicated a preference for grades and comments either on an assignment sheet or on the assignment. There was also some support for the use of private individual oral feedback as well. However, it is suggested that this would be in addition to a grade of some kind, given the majority of the respondents (15) who expressed a preference wanted a grade.

Feedback content

The respondents were also asked what was the content of the feedback on their assignments. The evidence would suggest that 32 of the respondents receive a grade, whereas 4 of the respondents received a mark. The same number of respondents (28), stated that the feedback they received indicated both positive and negative aspects of their work, and 17 respondents stated that the feedback also identified where the assignment did/did not meet the performance criteria. Also 1 respondent

(described under the option 'other') claimed that feedback was placed on a college notice board. Respondents stated (10), that the most important aspect of feedback to them was the receipt of positive and negative feedback on their work.

Self assessment

The respondents were then asked if they were evaluated using any form of self-assessment. 19% of respondents believe that they have undertaken self assessment in all their subjects, whereas 26% of the respondents claimed to have undertaken self assessment in most of their subjects. In addition, 15% of the respondents claimed to have undertaken self-assessment in some of their subjects. However, 40% of respondents claimed to have undertaken no self-assessment within their courses. This should be compared with staff responses to the question of whether they used self-assessments as part of their feedback. In this case, 21% of staff respondents claimed to use self-assessment regularly, with 65% of respondents claiming to use self-assessment occasionally, with 7% hardly ever and 7% never using self-assessment (see figure 21). A comparison of this data would suggest it is argued that self-assessment is taking place within the courses analysed in this research, with varying amounts of frequency and it is argued the concept of the self-assessment process is understood by most of the participant students. The data returns suggest that 11% of respondents believed that they took part in self-assessment on a weekly basis, 32% on a monthly basis, and 17 on a termly basis. The other respondents (4%) suggested that they undertake self-assessment 'when tests are set/example work set'.

Peer assessment

The respondents were also asked if they engaged in peer assessment as part of their courses. The returns suggest that 7% of student respondents felt that they had engaged in peer assessment in all of their subjects. A similar number of respondents (8%) felt that they had engaged in self-assessment in most subjects. However, 21% of respondents felt that they had engaged in peer assessment within some of their subjects, but 64% of respondents claimed not to have engaged in any peer assessment within their subjects. However, what is interesting when comparing this data with staff responses about the use of peer assessment is that the staff would suggest that more peer assessment is taking place than the student respondents are aware of. Of the staff respondents, 29% claim to use peer assessment regularly, 43% occasionally, 14% hardly ever and 14% never, respectively. The student respondents were also asked how often they engaged in peer assessment. 5% of respondents claimed that this happened weekly, 13% monthly, 23% termly, 2% other, who stated that peer assessment took place on return of each assignment. 57% of respondents stated that the question was not applicable.

On the same theme, the student respondents were asked if they felt it was important to compare their performance with that of their peers. 19% of respondents thought that it was, with 38% of respondents thinking that it was not, and 43% of the respondents stating that sometimes they thought that it was important to compare their performance with that of their peers. It is suggested that the student respondents are not negative to peer assignment generally. However, it is argued that peer assessment might be seen to be counterproductive, if it was seen to be too competitive, and involved the categorising of students. However, this is a tentative conclusion.

Analysis of staff questionnaires

Staff from all five participant colleges were asked to take part in the research, by filling in a questionnaire on their views and practices re feedback. 14 returns from all 5 colleges were returned.

Purposes of feedback

Staff expressed a variety of views on the purposes of feedback. These included: 'To help students learn', 'A quality check', 'To improve learning', 'Students should be better informed and more aware of their learning process and better able to evaluate their progress' and to 'Identify the special areas in which the student needs to improve skills or knowledge. Helps the student to avoid repeating the same mistakes'.

Content of feedback

When the staff respondents were asked what a good assessment in assessed written work should include, one respondent suggested that good feedback should include a discussion on the use of 'Appropriate research sources, knowledge of subject, understanding of research findings, development of ideas and original additions and the development of coherent account presentation'

Another respondent felt that a good example of feedback should contain 'Supportive comments where students have done well and questioning comments where there is uncertainty or an error. Also some points about where the work can be developed with a view to future assignments'. A respondent from another college felt that good feedback should: 'Refer to the tasks the student has attempted and should link that progress to the criteria stated for marking. How one student could improve their performance in relation to the next assignment should be given'.

It is argued that generally respondents held, regardless of college or discipline, a uniform view of assessment, and what feedback on assessment should contain.

Feedback in contact sessions

When asked about feedback in contact sessions, 71% of respondents claim to give regular feedback, with 8% claiming to use feedback occasionally, and 21% of respondents claiming to undertake feedback as and when required. The respondents were then asked what type of format the feedback takes in contact sessions. Two respondents from one college indicated that 'one-to-one, group work, and written mediums' were used. In a second participant college the respondents identified both 'group', and 'individual' feedback. In the third participant college the respondents again identified both individual and group discussion as being their method of feedback in contact sessions. This was also identified by the respondents from the fourth college, with one respondent identifying 'assessment and review' as being a feedback function within contact sessions. The respondent from the fifth contributory college, also identified 'class' discussion, and 'individual feedback, as being the medium used by them within the classroom situation.' This consistency with regard to feedback is interesting, as the courses used for the research by the colleges, involved groups which varied in curriculum disciplines from Fine Arts to Computer Studies.

Technology in feedback

This standardisation and continuity it is argued, is reflected again, in the lack of technology used in feedback by the five participant college staff, with only 36% of respondents claiming to have used technologies (with 64% not) in feedback. The technology the staff respondents claimed to use was mainly e-mail (all respondents who answered affirmative), with 'word processing, OHT, PowerPoint, and feedback template' being among the other technologies identified. The respondents also felt, that the technologies were helpful, with one respondent claiming that 'PowerPoint' feedback was particularly helpful'. One respondent commenting on e-mail stated that: 'E-mail has the advantage of making a dialogue possible over an extended timescale. However, not all students can make effective or regular use of it at present'.

Self assessment

As has already been stated 21% of respondents regularly used self-assessment, 65% occasionally using it. As to whether the respondents felt that self-assessment had been a useful tool in the delivery of feedback, this produced a mixed response, among the staff respondents, with one respondent feeling that: 'it's a good way to get the students to reflect on their own performance when tackling tasks'. This comment was typical of the many positive comments on self-assessment made by the respondents, although there was also a certain amount of negativity from the respondents about self-assessment. One respondent felt self-assessment was not useful as 'It seems to suit the more able, or certainly those students who are more likely to be on task'. Another respondent concluded that: 'With 16-18 olds, it can be useful as an exercise, however it creates problems as it is time consuming and their ability to be objective about the assessment is limited'. Another respondent stated that: 'Self-assessment can work well with some groups of students (one respondent identified mature students) but I have found that it can be strongly resented by some students'.

Peer assessment

When asked if they used peer assessment as part of their feedback, 29% of the staff respondents claimed to use it regularly, with 43% occasionally, and 14% claiming they hardly ever used it, and 4% of staff respondents claiming they never use it (see figure 22). As with self-assessment, there were mixed feelings about the usefulness of peer assessment. One respondent stated that peer assessment was useful as 'Students have an opportunity to discuss ideas and develop awareness of how other students perceive their work'. However, there was concern that students felt defensive about peer assessment so it was not useful. One respondent stated: 'I would be less likely to use it because some students may feel apprehensive about it'.

All the respondents were of the opinion that students were keen to receive feedback. However, one respondent felt that this might be on condition that they hear what they want to hear, and another respondent was concerned that often the feedback students wanted was pertinent to a grade, rather than feedback on the work itself. In addition, the respondents showed strong support for the contention that regular feedback was a 'major tool' for facilitating the learning and acquisition of skills by the students. However, one respondent questioned whether this was true for all levels. Generally though, the response was positive. Two respondents expressed the view that the feedback given was useful, if it was related to the students' self-assessment, but was less useful if it was related simply to grading.

Focus Group interviews: data from students

After a reflection on the results obtained from the first action research cycle, some of the issues that came out of the data were further refined and defined by using structured focus interviews.

Electronic feedback

The students were asked a range of questions on their views of feedback from assignments. Firstly, students were asked how they would feel about receiving feedback using electronic mail. The general view of the students to e-mail feedback was negative at the majority of the colleges. The students at one of the colleges thought that e-mail was impersonal and would require them to have access to the net. Access to the net was also an issue raised by another group of students at another college. In addition, they also were concerned that e-mail was a one-way process, and if feedback was queried then this could lead to a protracted discussion between the tutors and staff. At the second college, the students also expressed the view that staff might not read their e-mail for weeks!

A fourth group of students felt that there were too many technical problems which might arise if they depended upon e-mail, although the same group thought that it might be alright if lecturers agreed to use it and 'stuck to it'. However, one of the college's student groups was quite positive, as they felt that e-mail might get them a quicker response than trying to track tutors down. The students at the fifth college were also not very keen on e-mail feedback, claiming that they preferred one to one verbal feedback. The students also raised the question of what would a student do with e-mail feedback if they did not understand it?

Types of feedback

The second question asked what types of feedback did the students usually get. Within this question there were a range of answers. Students from one college stated that they thought that the feedback they received was unusual, as tutors took them into a room and talked to them on a one to one basis. Also there was evidence, that students undertook assessment in groups as well, to see what other students do, and the students concluded that this was inspired and encourage them to do well. The students all agreed that this was much more like working; with grading only taking place at the end of the course.

At a second college the students stated that they received verbal feedback on their work and reports from their assignments on the notice board, which had their grades on it. Students also stated that feedback often consisted of written comments, and meetings between individuals and members of staff and group reviews of their work. At the third college, the group of students stated that the feedback they received had the following characteristics, in that firstly the teachers usually wrote comments on assignments. However, they also felt the availability of oral feedback varied between teachers. They concluded that there were however, feedback sheets which were attached to assignment completion sheets. The students also reported that there were different feedback sheets in existence, but that they all included a section for the teacher to feedback on, and a section for students to make a response. In addition, the students claimed that guidelines on how to use feedback were given in the assignment details sheet.

At the fourth college however, concern was expressed by the students at the lack of feedback in some instances, as they claimed that on some modules they had had no feedback at all! However, on modules where they did have feedback, they received 'structured' sheets where their good and bad points were discussed. Students also claimed that sometimes this was also supplemented by some individual oral feedback. The students at the fifth college claimed that they had a front cover sheet on their assignments, with grades and written notes. In addition, they stated that notes were also written on the assignments themselves. They then claimed that the tutor handed back the assignment to the students and then conducted a one to one review, which the students claimed they liked.

When asked what feedback students would like, the students from the first college stated that they liked things as they were. The students in the second college were also happy with the feedback they received. These students also felt that they were able to 'moan' if they were not getting adequate feedback and/or see tutors themselves. The students from the third college stated that they would like to see more detail in written feedback, which should include detail on how they could improve and more use of oral feedback. The students from the fourth college agreed that more one to one feedback was needed. The students in this college were also concerned that they needed to receive feedback from the first assignment before starting the second, and that this had not occurred on many occasions. The students at the fifth participating college, liked the current system (described earlier) very much, claiming that they found the tutors approachable and in addition stating that staff were always prepared to help students. The students added that staff were always willing to deal with telephone enquires.

Student use of feedback

Students were then asked what they did with the feedback that they got. The students in the first college stated that they discussed and thought about what had been said, and about how things were wrong and how they could be improved. The students in the second college agreed, they stated that they tried to improve in areas where they had received critical feedback. The students in the fourth college stated that often it was too late to use the feedback constructively because they were already well on with assignments, and therefore they had not got time to respond to criticisms. They also expressed the view that not enough time was given for part time students between assignments. The students in the third college stated, that if the feedback they received was constructive and positive, they were likely to act upon it, but they were likely to be 'fed up' with negative criticism. A minority of the students also stated that the student response sections on the assignment documentation did enable them to raise specific issues although this phenomenon was not common in all colleges. Students at the fifth college stated, that they used the feedback as a guide for the next assignment. A student gave an example of feedback given, where she was told to include more theory, which she duly did in the next assignment and was awarded a distinction!

The students were then asked if what they did with the feedback was influenced by the grade/mark that was given. The students from the first college stated that this question was not applicable. For them, what influenced their work was what they (the students) got out of it, and they referred in particular to the peer meetings, as they claimed that they learnt from these the amount of work that had to be done. The students from the second college had mixed views, one student stated: 'Well it can depend on the factors of the course. If I get a bad mark, I think oh well the whole thing is crap and if I get a good mark, why improve on that?'. Another student in the same group stated: 'Some of us are not working for marks, some of us are working to get passes in our portfolios but yes we should not be getting just pass work, we should be aiming higher'.

The third college student group also found the question difficult. However, one student concluded that when he got a distinction he would like to know how, so that he could achieve the grade again next time. Another student stated that it was obvious that if you got a referral then you had to act upon it, otherwise you would fail. The fourth college student group concluded that a distinction gives you confidence, so feedback is still good as you know you are doing it right. The students also stated that if they were to be awarded a 'bare pass', then they were more likely to go through the work, and use it in future assignments. The students at the fifth college felt that the grade was important, as they concluded that if you get a good grade, then you know that you are on the right track. The students also stated that when they were awarded a distinction, then the feedback usually says what was good and how you could improve.

Students were then asked, whether they used feedback from previous assignments when undertaking new assignments. The students at the first college stated that they did 'in a way' but that by the second year of the course they were developing their own ideas and discovering what's possible for them, what their ideas are, and whether they are possible. The students at the second college stated, that their vocational/practical discipline made this difficult although this concept might involve them in concentrating on not making the same practical mistake again. The students at the third college felt that their assignments varied very much, so that it was not possible to really use comments on one assignment for others. The students in the fourth college concluded that they would, and do use it if they have got it. The students at the fifth stated that they used feedback from previous assignments to help with future assignments.

The seventh question that the students were asked, sought to ascertain in what way did they use the feedback. The students in the first and second colleges felt that the question was not applicable to them. However, in the third college the students suggested that they got to know the standards individual teachers had, and thus teachers who expected high standards would get a certain response from these students and vice versa. The students at the fourth college concluded that if the feedback highlighted a 'glaring' error then they would not do it again. They also concluded that they used this feedback, to reflect back and make sure that their previous errors are not repeated, and then they used it as a model, to shape and refine the new mark. The students in the fifth college claimed they used the feedback as a guide for the future.

Finally, the students were asked if they had ever been told what the college expected them to do with the feedback they received. The students at the first college stated that they had not. The students at the second college also answered in the negative. One student stated that he thought the question was pointless, because what students did with feedback was their own issue, and students did not need the college to tell them what they should do with it, and he would have felt like a 'kid' if he had been told. The third college interpreted the question as relating to individual teachers rather than the college per se and attributed the words 'listen to me and you will pass' to some of the lecturing staff. The fourth group of college students claimed that they had not been told what the college expects them to do with the feedback they have been given, however, they added that students were told about appeals procedures. The students also concluded that it was taken as read by them, that whatever was written on an action sheet was to be acted upon. The students from the fifth college also answered the question in the negative.

Focus Group interviews: data from staff

Electronic feedback

The first question that the staff were asked was, how did they think that their students would react to e-mail feedback? The staff at the first college stated that they did have a 'spell' using e-mail and fax but it did not go well. The staff also felt that it depended upon the person and their literacy skills. The staff at the second college felt that students would be positive if they had access to e-mail, but this was not universal. One member of staff claimed to have used it in the past but its use was not widespread. The staff in the third college claimed not to have an e-mail facility. However, it is argued that this is surprising as in the questionnaires all respondents from this college claimed to have used e-mail for feedback! The staff at the fourth college stated that they felt that students' views would be mixed, with some in favour and some less so. The staff at the fifth college felt the students would not be keen on using e-mail.

When the staff were asked if they would like to use e-mail to give feedback to students, staff from the first college stated that they would use e-mail only if it was the only medium available, as they would prefer to use the telephone. The staff at the second college felt that they would prefer to use verbal feedback and interaction. They also felt that e-mail feedback might be misunderstood. However, the staff also felt that with administrative support they could use e-mail to supplement verbal feedback, although they felt e-mail should not be used if it was the only means of feedback as it was impersonal, and if it was used for every student it would be too much work for staff. The staff at the third college were concerned whether students would read their e-mails as this could not be known. It would appear from the data, that neither staff nor students trust each other to read their e-mail! They also felt that if feedback was given back to students at the end of a lesson, then staff would know that it had been read.

The staff at fourth college felt that e-mail would involve a change of assessment style, as it would be detached from the student assignments. The staff at the fifth college stated that they did not use e-mail feedback but thought it might be appropriate to use in certain circumstances. The examples that they cited were that if a student was to get a new job/promotion, and because of this was unable to attend all the classes then e-mail would be appropriate. The staff felt that in this case the student could use e-mail to keep up to date, get help with particular problems etc, and receive appropriate feedback from the tutor.

Staff Development in feedback

Staff were then asked, if they had ever undertaken any staff development (either internally or externally) into student feedback. The staff at the first college claimed to have had a day at the

University of Wolverhampton to assess feedback through QAA, and in the college. The staff at the second college claimed not to have had any formal feedback training/staff development apart from work they had done as part of their teaching certificates. The staff at the third and fourth colleges both claimed that they had not received any training/staff development in feedback. The staff at the fifth college stated that they had recently had an internal staff development event, which had covered feedback on GNVQ programmes, but not HNCs.

Staff knowledge of student use of feedback

The staff were then asked if they knew what the students did with the feedback that they received. The staff at the first college stated that some feedback gets used, and effects transformation in either the method or end products of the students. They concluded however, that in terms of data, they issued questionnaires, which contained some feedback in them. The second college stated, that they felt students read it straight away so they knew that it was looked at, however, they were not sure what happened to that feedback after that, and they felt that this probably varied with the various students, with some students clearly taking more notice than others. The staff at the third college stated that students read the feedback, and this might lead to some students questioning it, which then lead to follow up discussions.

The staff at the fourth college concluded that some students act upon feedback quite directly, while some ignore it completely no matter what is said. The staff at the fifth college stated that if the grade was a referral grade then the students used the feedback to improve the grade. The staff felt that in general, they all hoped that the feedback was used to improve the performance in the future. The staff concluded however, that most students just looked at the grade and then filed the assessment as 'students are really only interested in the grade'.

Staff expectation of student use of feedback

The staff were then asked what they expected students to do with the feedback that they gave them. The staff at the first college stated, that they saw the whole purpose of feedback as being to increase learning, and that is what they hoped would happen. The staff at the second college stated that they would expect the students to respond positively. They continued: 'We expect students to use feedback to develop their own potential and skills.' The staff at the third college stated that they felt that students should take note of the feedback and try to do better in the next assignment. The staff at the fourth college stated that they expected students to react to feedback with a view to acting on it. They also stated that they preferred students to come to them to talk about some issues. The staff at the fifth college felt that too often students were more interested in the grade.

College guidelines for use of feedback

The staff at the colleges were then asked if they or their organisations had ever put any procedures in place, (formally or informally), to encourage students to use the feedback given constructively. The staff at the first college stated that procedures were in place within booklets that had been produced for the course. The group of staff in the second college stated that they had informal procedures, where all students had to use feedback with each other in front of the other students. However, they concluded that there were some formal procedures which required staff to assess students with more than one tutor. The staff at the third college concluded that the procedures at their college were informal and they were summed up as: 'Take note-you can then improve with the next assignment'

It is argued that a cursory glance at the student focus group responses from the students would suggest that this simple message has been registered with the student body as 'listen to me and you will pass'. The staff at the fourth college stated, that the procedures were informal and that they had considered peer group marking to encourage students to reflect more on what they had written. One member of staff stated: 'I have sat students down and gone through assessment criteria, their work, and my comments, to show them where I got it from.' The staff at the fifth college stated, that they had no formal procedure.

Use of student drafts

Staff at the colleges were then asked if they encouraged students to hand drafts of their work for comment before handing the substantive work in. The staff at the first college stated that all the first year work of students was subject by the college to an interim critique, which in the second year made the students more confident in submitting drafts. The staff at the second college stated that, there was a great deal of work in progress, although students did not hand work as such, as staff and students

‘consulted’ together as part of a formative assessment process on a piece of work, leading to summative assessment. The students at the third college stated that they encouraged drafts, but students usually leave too little time to produce drafts, although they can and do ask for help as they work on the production of the assignment. Problems with time, was also an issue for the staff at the fourth college, who stated that they had taken drafts in on the ‘A’ Level course, but were not able to on the degree due to time constraints. The staff at the fifth college claimed, that they did encourage them. They also claimed that they encouraged the students to seek help from their tutors while the assignment/assessment is in progress, even if it was just to get ideas, and get started.

Conclusions

These conclusions are the views of the researcher only.

It is concluded firstly, that the students are generally happy with their courses, as 72% believe that the learning goals for their course are clear. Also, 36% find their course interesting and stimulating in all subjects, and 53% in most subjects. 75% of the students felt that they would recommend the course to their friends. Within the context of this, and building on the research by Black and Wiliam (1998), it is argued that the students should generally be favourably inclined to use the feedback they receive, as part of their overall satisfaction with their course. The student satisfaction with feedback (28% of the respondents thought feedback was good in all subjects, 54% good in some and satisfactory in others) would support this view.

Secondly it is suggested that students receive a variety of feedback. However, this feedback is of a traditional type, being written on assignment, assignment sheets or delivered orally to individuals or groups. The use of electronic or telephonic medium in giving feedback is virtually non-existent on any of the courses which ranged from Fine Arts to Computers.

There would appear, to be a marked reluctance from both students and staff to use e-mail for the delivery of feedback. It is argued that this is due mainly to fears of impersonality, and the loss of any opportunity to engage in dialogue between the assessor and the assessed, although fears of technical failure, access, and students/staff not opening e-mails were also mentioned.

Most staff are now giving grades, with only 4 respondents claiming they received marks, and the majority of student respondents also appeared to receive feedback on both positive and negative aspects of their work. It is argued that these results are what is expected, as both staff and students saw the process of feedback as being to enable students to improve on the work in future assignments and to know where they had gone wrong.

There is some evidence that staff and students are using self and peer assessment. Peer assessment would not appear to be as popular as self assessment with staff. Staff are concerned in some cases where peer assessment is used, that students can become more interested in grades than in the feedback itself. They would appear to argue it causes excessive competition between students, and means students are not concentrating on the quality of what they actually produce. The majority of students do however, feel that it is important to compare themselves with their peers, and it is argued it is inevitable that students would wish to benchmark themselves against their peers.

Recommendations

To conclude this research, the researcher was also asked to make some recommendations. Again it is stressed, that these are the researchers’ own recommendations, and not those of the Action Learning Set.

Firstly, research needs to be undertaken into how to incorporate technology into the feedback process to reduce staff and student concerns

It is further recommended that notwithstanding the views of some students, Colleges look to develop guidelines for students, on how to effectively utilise feedback to their benefit. This research found many instances of innovative use of self and peer assessment. It is suggested that this ‘good practice’ is developed and disseminated within the sector.

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Appendix 1

Student Feedback Questionnaire (edited) and Responses

(The full questionnaire, with all student instructions, questions and original spacing is not shown here)

1. The learning goals for my course unit are clear

a	In all subjects on my course	72%
b	In some subjects on my course	28%
c	In no subjects on my course	0%

2. The assignments that I receive on my course have clear learning goals, which I understand and can relate to the learning goals on the course.

a	In all of my subjects	53%
b	In most of my subjects	43%
c	In some of my subjects	2%
d	In none of my subjects	2%

3. I find the context of my course interesting and stimulating

a	In all of my subjects	36%
b	In most of my subjects	53%
c	In some of my subjects	8%
d	In none of my subjects	3%

4. I find myself wanting to ask the tutor questions

a	In all of my subjects	38%
b	In most of my subjects	28%
c	In some of my subjects	30%
d	In none of my subjects	4%

5. I think that the feedback I receive from my tutors on my course is:

a	Good in all subjects	28%
b	Good in some subjects and satisfactory in others	54%
c	Good in some subjects and poor in others	8%
d	Satisfactory in all subjects	5%
e	Satisfactory in some subjects, and poor in others	5%
f	Poor in all subjects	0%

6. I think that the quality of the course that I am on, compared to that I was promised by the college before I joined is:

a	Identical to what I was promised	34%
b	In most ways what I was promised (i.e. 75%+)	53%
c	In some ways what I was promised (i.e. 50%+)	9%
d	Not very much like I was promised (i.e. 20-49%)	4%
e	Not at all like I was promised (i.e. 0-19%)	0%

7. When I receive feedback on my assignment work, it is in the following way(s).
Please mark all appropriate options. (Response = no. of times the option was selected)

a	Grade and comments written on the assignment	24	
b	Grade and comments written on an assignment sheet	20	
c	Grade and comments both on an assignment sheet and comments on the assignment	14	
d	Oral feedback to the group generally	20	
e	Oral feedback privately to an individual student	21	
f	Feedback on the telephone to an individual	0	
g	Feedback using e-mail	1	
h	Feedback using a fax	0	
i	Other. Please state below	2	

8. Of the options given above (including other if applicable) what is your preferred model(s) of receiving feedback on your progress?

9. The feedback that you receive back from your assignment work, does it consist of, (please indicate all statements that are applicable):
- | | | |
|---|---|----|
| a | A grade | 32 |
| b | A mark i.e. 7/10 | 4 |
| c | An indication of the positive aspects of the work | 28 |
| d | An indication of the negative aspects of the work | 28 |
| e | An identification of where the assignment does/does not meet performance criteria | 17 |
| f | Other (s) please state below | 4 |
10. What type of feedback would you like to see on your returned assignments?
11. Apart from marked assignment work, are you engaged in self-assessment feedback (for example through classroom tests, which you mark to assess your progress) with your tutor in regard to your performance?
- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----|
| a | Yes, in all subjects | 19% |
| b | In most subjects (i.e. 50% +) | 26% |
| c | In some subjects (i.e. 49%-) | 15% |
| d | In no subjects | 40% |
12. If applicable, how often do you engage in self assessment exercises on your course in all subjects?
- | | | |
|---|----------------------|-----|
| a | Once a week or more | 11% |
| b | Once a month or more | 32% |
| c | Once a term or more | 17% |
| d | Other, please state | 4% |
| e | Not applicable | 36% |
13. Do you engage in any form of peer assessment to feedback on your performance course? (Peer assessment might be where you mark each other's class tests etc).
- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----|
| a | Yes in all subjects | 7% |
| b | In most subjects (i.e. 50%+) | 8% |
| c | In some subjects (i.e. 49%-) | 21% |
| d | In no subjects | 64% |
14. If applicable, how often do you engage in peer assessment exercises on your course?
- | | | |
|---|----------------------|-----|
| a | Once a week or more | 5% |
| b | Once a month or more | 13% |
| c | Once a term or more | 23% |
| d | Other, please state | 2% |
| e | Not applicable | 57% |
15. Please describe (if applicable) your feelings on the usefulness or otherwise to you of self/peer assessment.
16. Do you think that it is important to compare your performance against your peers?
- | | | |
|---|-----------|-----|
| a | Yes | 19% |
| b | No | 38% |
| c | Sometimes | 43% |
21. Would you recommend the course you are on to a friend?
- | | | |
|---|-------|-----|
| a | Yes | 75% |
| b | No | 6% |
| c | Maybe | 19% |

Appendix 2

Staff Questionnaire (edited)

1. What do you think that the purpose of feedback is?
2. What do you think that a good example of feedback on assessed written work should include?
3. Do you provide any type of feedback during contact sessions? (please select the most appropriate statement to you).

a Regularly	71%
b Occasionally	8%
c As and when required	21%
d Hardly ever	0%
4. What type of format does your feedback take, i.e. individual/class discussion etc.?
5. Have you used any technological means to give feedback, i.e. e-mail?

a Yes	36%
b No	64%
6. If applicable, list the technologies used.
7. Did you find the technologies aided the delivery of quality feedback or not? (If applicable)
8. Do you use self- assessment methods of feedback within your classrooms?

a Regularly	21%
b Occasionally	65%
c Hardly ever	7%
d Never	7%
9. Have you found self -assessment to be a useful tool in the delivery of feedback within your classes? (If applicable)
10. Do you use peer assessment methods of feedback within your classrooms?

a Regularly	29%
b Occasionally	43%
c Hardly ever	14%
d Never	14%
11. Have you found peer assessment to be a useful tool in the delivery of feedback within your classes? (If applicable)
12. Do your students appreciate feedback?
13. Do you think that regular feedback can help a student to improve their work at all levels in a college?

Appendix 3

Structured Interview: Students

1. How would you feel about receiving feedback using electronic e-mail?
2. What type(s) of feedback do you usually get?
3. What type(s) of feedback would you like?
4. What do you as a student do with the feedback that you get?
5. Is what you do with the feedback influenced by the grade/ mark that you get?
6. Do you use feedback from previous assignments when undertaking new assignments?
7. In what way do you use this feedback?
8. Have you ever been told what the college expects you to do with the feedback you receive?

Structured Interview: Staff

1. How do you think that your students would react to e-mail feedback?
2. Would you like to use e-mail to give feedback to students?
3. Do you receive guidelines for feedback, from your awarding body?
4. If you do receive guidelines from your awarding body, do you know what they are?
5. If your awarding body does have guidelines on feedback, do they monitor it in any way?
6. Have you ever undertaken any staff development (either internally or externally) into student feedback?
7. Has your organisation ever experimented (or indeed used) cross curricula teams of staff to evaluate feedback within your organisation?
8. Do you know what your students do with the feedback you give them?
9. What do you expect students to do with the feedback you give them?
10. Have you or your organisation ever put any procedures in place (formally or informally) to encourage students to use the feedback given constructively?
11. Do you encourage students to hand in drafts of the work for comment before handing the substantive work in?
12. Does your view on the type of feedback required by a student change as she/he progresses through their course?